

Singapore

Singapore police refute allegations that coast guard entered Malaysian waters; Johor politician calls for remap of maritime borders

The Kota Iskandar state assemblyman claimed that a Singapore maritime boat had damaged the nets belonging to four local fishermen.



A photo of a Singapore Police Coast Guard vessel on Jun 27. (Photo: CNA/Gaya Chandramohan)



Amir Yusof

20 Aug 2023 02:45PM | (Updated: 20 Aug 2023 04:53PM)

ISKANDAR PUTERI, Johor: The Singapore Police Force (SPF) have refuted allegations in media reports that a police coast guard (PCG) boat had entered

Malaysian waters and "intentionally" damaged nets belonging to local fisherman.

The incident, nonetheless, has prompted a Johor politician to call for a remapping of the maritime border particularly in the Johor Strait, though analysts say such a move will have to be handled at the federal level.

In a statement on Sunday (Aug 20) giving details of the alleged incident on Aug 14, the SPF said PCG officers had been enforcing Singapore's laws within the city-state's territorial waters as it rebutted the allegations in media reports by Malaysian outlets Sinar Harian and Berita Harian (Malaysia) as "untrue".

The SPF said that at 6.55am that day, PCG officers were patrolling Singapore Territorial Waters (STW) when they spotted a Malaysian fishing vessel at STW at the sea off Tuas.

"At the time, there were a few other fishing vessels in the vicinity, but they were in Malaysia Territorial Waters (MTW). PCG officers engaged the fisherman on board the fishing vessel in STW and advised him to leave STW," the police said.

It added that after the engagement, a fishing net became entangled with the propellers of the coast guard boat which was reversing to try to avoid entering Malaysia waters.

"The fishing net was subsequently damaged in the process of untangling it from the propellers. PCG officers were enforcing Singapore's laws within STW," SPF said.

Following the incident, Kota Iskandar state assemblyman Pandak Ahmad has told media that he would be tabling a motion in the next state assembly sitting on Sept 11 to remap the maritime border between Malaysia and Singapore in the Johor Strait.

Speaking during a press conference on Wednesday (Aug 16), Mr Pandak Ahmad had also alleged that a verbal altercation occurred during the Aug 14 incident between four local fishermen and a PCG boat before the boat "intentionally hit" the fishing net belonging to the fishermen and damaged it.

"We are a country that has sovereignty and demarcated borders but the Singapore coast guard acts as if the Tebrau Straits belongs to them," added the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) politician.

"They inadvertently enter our waters. Our fishermen who look for fish in these areas every day know where the maritime borders are, but these (Singapore boats) act in a provocative manner," he said during the press conference.

A fisherman involved in the incident, Faizan Wahid, reportedly made a police report

claiming that his net was damaged and torn by the Singapore boat, with a financial loss of up to RM700 (S\$204.42).

Mr Pandak later told CNA that the maritime borders needed to be redrawn “for the safety of hundreds of fishermen” who work in the area.

He also alleged that in an earlier incident in October 2022, 10 local fishermen had been chased away by Singapore authorities while fishing in waters near the Second Link bridge in Pasir Laba.

Addressing this in their Sunday statement, SPF said the same fisherman in the latest incident which also happened near the Second Link bridge was also involved in the October 2022 incident, adding that he had been then asked to leave a live firing area in STW for his own safety.

"During the October 2022 incident, he had also falsely claimed that he was in MTW when he was in fact in STW. The SPF had similarly issued a clarification regarding his allegations," said SPF.

In a statement released then, police said that coast guard officers were patrolling STW when they spotted a group of Malaysian fishing vessels entering and exiting the live firing area of Singapore waters off Lim Chu Kang.

The coast guard officers approached the Malaysian fishing vessels and used their public address system on their boat to advise them to leave the live firing area in STW.

DISPUTE WILL ONLY BE DISCUSSED AND RESOLVED AT FEDERAL LEVEL

On Mr Pandak's call for a remapping of maritime borders, experts CNA spoke to said these matters are typically handled by Cabinet ministers at the federal level and added that there was no guarantee that the Malaysia government would be willing to surface this issue with their Singapore counterparts.

Both countries reportedly last held meetings in 2019 to discuss maritime boundaries delimitation, following an earlier dispute sparked by Malaysia's unilateral extension of the Johor Bahru Port Limits off Tanjung Piai, which overlapped with Singapore's port limits off Tuas.

Singapore had protested against Malaysia's extension in October 2018, saying it resulted in Malaysia government vessels making repeated incursions into Singapore waters, with the Republic later extending its own port limits in response, which were still in its territorial waters.

Both later agreed to suspend their overlapping port claims and revert to their former limits, as well as not to authorise and to suspend all commercial activities in the area, and not to anchor any government vessels there.

A committee was also set up to study the legal and operational issues relating to the maritime dispute to provide a basis for negotiations.

Associate Professor Bilveer Singh of the National University of Singapore's political science department told CNA: "Singapore is a small city state, it will do whatever it can to defend every inch of sovereignty. However, a resolution must be reached because these incidents keep cropping up.

"These negotiations will likely be done between the two federal governments, the state government can only exert pressure. Whether this pressure will work or not it remains to be seen," said Assoc Prof Singh.

Commenting on the recent maritime issue, marine expert Hazmi Mohd Rusli told CNA that Singapore and Malaysia signed a border treaty in 1995 to precisely delimit boundaries in the Johor Strait.

He added that if this dispute escalates, Mr Hazmi said that it would be best done by negotiations between the two governments at the federal level.

"Both nations could negotiate to achieve a win-win situation," said Mr Hazmi, outlining how the Malaysian and Indonesian governments recently [agreed to the delimitation of territorial seas in the Sulawesi Sea and southernmost part of the Straits of Melaka.](#)

Maritime lawyer Clive Selvapandian, a partner with Chistopher and Lee Ong, told CNA that if diplomatic channels are exhausted, the countries can consider submitting the dispute to the jurisdiction of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, the International Court of Justice or an arbitral tribunal.

This is because both Singapore and Malaysia are signatories under Article 287 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Source: CNA/am